

Roll Call, December 4, 2006

The 110th Congress will face a number of national security issues, none more dangerous over the next two years than the rise of narcoterrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Narcoterrorism - terrorism fueled by the sale of illegal narcotics - appeared long ago in our Western Hemisphere. Back in the 1980s, Colombian cartels and insurgent groups began attacking their government using billions of dollars in cocaine money.

Initially, insurgent groups rented their forces to drug cartels for protection and logistics. Later, they went into the drug business themselves. With access to billions of dollars in drug profits, narcoterrorists often arm their fighters with equipment that is better than the local government's or even the U.S. military's.

The rise of narcoterrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia is new. With the expansion of poppy cultivation and opium/heroin production in Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaida are funding their comeback, backed by the largest poppy crop in history. Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai warned, "Either Afghanistan destroys opium or opium will destroy Afghanistan." The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime commented, "we are dangerously close to the second option."

Profits from the sale of opium are restoring strength to the Taliban and its allies in Pakistan. In 2002, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf deployed his army along the lawless Afghan border. The Pakistani army fought a number of battles with the Taliban, which actually grew in strength during the conflict. Funded by the booming opium trade, Taliban, al-Qaida and Uzbek terrorists fought the Pakistani army to a draw. This summer, the Pakistani government changed course and dramatically curtailed the use of its army along the frontier. It was a strategic victory for al-Qaida and the Taliban. From their new safe haven in Pakistan, terrorists will be able to increase their attacks against the Afghan government and NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan.

The danger posed by narcoterrorism is growing here in America. Recently, Mullah Omar's top

financier, Afghan drug lord Haji Basir Noorzai, was arrested in New York attempting to sell \$50 million worth of Afghan heroin in the United States. Afghan heroin sales in the U.S. still are rising. Unless this trend is stopped, Central Asian drug lords with ties to al-Qaida not only will increase their profits but also will develop logistical links in the U.S. that could be exploited to harm America far beyond importing heroin.

Narcoterrorists already are causing great harm to America. The heroin they offer poses a new risk. Traditionally, heroin sold in the U.S. was only 30 percent pure and had to be injected to produce a high. Many American kids will not use needles and resisted even trying the drug. With the supply of heroin going up so fast, the new Afghan heroin sold in the U.S. is 100 percent pure and can be snorted. Kids now are much more likely to try a drug that does not require needles. Statistics show that emergency room visits for heroin overdoses are up more than 400 percent in many suburban hospitals. The Dutch government reports that despite its best efforts at drug treatment and counseling, more than half of kids in that country who tried heroin remain hooked the rest of their lives. The government there is building retirement homes for addicts hooked in the 1960s. The lesson they learned regarding heroin is that "prevention is worth 10,000 pounds of cure."

The U.S. military understandably has been reluctant to expand its mission in Afghanistan to take on the drug trade. The United Nations reports that more than half of the Afghan economy is linked to opium, with poppies now growing in nearly all of Afghanistan's provinces. NATO militaries also are reluctant to expand their mission. The Canadian army, one of the few NATO contingents to deploy in southern Afghanistan where the drug lords are strong, has lost more than 30 soldiers in the fight against the Taliban just this year. The German government refuses to commit its troops to this part of Afghanistan, and many other NATO Afghan contingents limit their forces to only construction or humanitarian work.

This is where Congress has a role. Many Democrats and Republicans clearly see the danger posed by drug profits fueling terrorism. Two years ago, Reps. Jim Kolbe (Ariz.) and Nita Lowey (N.Y.) joined to dramatically boost funding above President Bush's request for the Afghan police and army to take on this battle. They were backed by Reps. Jerry Lewis (Calif.) and David Obey (Wis.), who ensured that Congress funded a huge expansion in an Afghan helicopter force to support Afghan police and the Drug Enforcement Administration. The House also backed my amendments to bring the DEA back into the U.S. intelligence community and add assets to their Afghan operations, and the Senate backed an amendment by Sen. Charles Schumer (N.Y.) to add funding for Defense Department operations against the Central Asian drug trade.

Due to Congressional leadership, the Afghan government, Defense and NATO will have more

tools available this spring to meet the growing threat. Due to the vast profits available to terrorists and drug lords, we should understand we have made only a start. New reports indicate that other terrorist groups, like Hezbollah, control the drug trade in their regions to generate funding for their operations. As we tighten U.N. and Treasury controls on terrorist financing, many terrorist groups now are turning to the drug trade to finance their operations. To win this fight, Congress and the president must recognize the new links between drugs and terror and ensure Defense, the DEA and our allies have the tools to meet the 21st-century narcoterrorist threat.

Rep. Mark Kirk (Ill.) is a member of the Appropriations Committee and also serves as a Naval Reserve intelligence officer.